

July 27, 2011

To all members of the Sejm and the Polish Senate
Wiejska 4/6/8
00-902 Warszawa
POLAND

Dear Sir or Madam,

We are Catholics who, like you, are concerned about the welfare, health and rights of Polish women. Although we hail from 11 different countries, we are united by our faith, and by its demand for social justice which calls upon us to champion the needs of those who are suffering, wherever they may be.

You are now in a position to decide whether or not Polish women will be forced to contend with a grave threat to their health, a threat that will be compounded if you criminalize abortion under all circumstances. We have experienced first-hand the grave suffering caused to women and society when abortion is banned. We know that banning abortion does not end abortion, but rather only endangers women's lives, and especially the lives of poor women. Therefore, we write to urge you to support women in Poland, and reject efforts to further restrict abortion access for women who need it.

It is unjust when women around the world suffer as a result of laws that prioritize political, religious, and other ideologies over their health and well-being. Time and again, we have witnessed the special vulnerability of poor women, whose lives are damaged and in some cases destroyed because they lack access to adequate health care. When governments pass laws that restrict women's access to critical health care services, it is not only their health which suffers but their very freedom.

As Catholics, we cannot in good conscience turn our backs on women who make the difficult choice to terminate their pregnancies, nor can we ignore the suffering caused by policies which make it difficult for women to do so safely. In fact, it is our Catholic faith which compels us to approach the issue of abortion with compassion and understanding. As you weigh your vote on the proposed abortion ban, we urge you to consider the following:

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a Decidir
Lima, Perú

1. Even if you are personally against abortion, you do not have to write an anti-abortion law.

In his Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, Pope Paul VI instructs “all Christians” within the political community to “demonstrate concretely how authority can be compatible with freedom.”¹ The Second Vatican Council’s *Declaration on Religious Freedom* calls on Catholics to respect the positions of people of other faiths, which is particularly significant given that the Catholic hierarchy’s positions on health policies are more conservative than those of other major faith groups and of much of the Catholic laity.² Catholics can and do support public policies that acknowledge the moral agency of women, respect developing life, and appreciate the Catholic tradition while honoring views which diverge from those of the Vatican.

2. Even in Catholic countries which have anti-abortion laws, policymakers do not ban the procedure outright because doing so threatens women’s lives and health. Our Catholic social justice tradition instructs us to stand with these women.

Within our Catholic tradition, the preferential option for the poor calls us to protect the needy and marginalized. Wherever abortion is prohibited, women who lack the economic resources necessary to obtain a safe abortion turn to whatever means are within their reach to end their pregnancies. The methods available to them place their health, and their very lives, at risk. Prohibiting abortion means that poor women who attempt to terminate their pregnancies are more likely to die or suffer injury as a result because they lack the financial means necessary to obtain a safe procedure. Those who support a total abortion ban are turning a blind eye to the suffering of women who choose to terminate their pregnancies, and especially the suffering of poor women whom we as Catholics are called to protect.

3. You can be Catholic and support a woman’s right to decide; in fact, Catholics the world over do.

Church teachings on moral decision-making and abortion are complex, and they have changed over time. In the 1974 *Declaration on Procured Abortion*, the Vatican acknowledged that it does not know when the fetus becomes a person: “There is not a unanimous tradition on this point and authors are as yet in disagreement.”³ In fact, neither St. Augustine nor St. Thomas Aquinas considered the fetus in the early stages of pregnancy to be a person. What we do know is that at the heart of church teachings on moral matters is a deep regard for an individual’s conscience, and that in many countries only a minority of Catholics agree with current church leaders on abortion.

Although there are leaders, both political and religious, who claim to speak for Catholics, they do not speak for all of us. In Poland, where 88 percent of the population is Catholic, only 14% of Poles agree that abortion should be entirely prohibited⁴. Only 14 percent of Catholics in the United States agree with the bishops that abortion should be completely illegal⁵, and Catholic women in the US have abortions at the same rate as women in the population as a whole.⁶ Majorities of Catholics in Bolivia (66 percent), Colombia (54 percent) and Mexico (69 percent)—all predominantly Catholic countries—believe abortion should be permitted under some or all circumstances.⁷ In Italy, which is 97 percent Catholic, 74 percent favor the use of RU-486 (a drug used instead of surgical

methods in some early abortions).⁸ Clearly, when it comes to the Vatican's teachings on abortion, Catholics the world over stand well apart from the hierarchy.

Church teachings, tradition, and core Catholic tenets leave room for supporting a more liberal position on abortion than an absolute ban. The Vatican has acknowledged that it does not know when a fetus becomes a person and has never declared its position on abortion to be infallible. We urge you to consider the likely devastating impact on Polish women and society of an absolute ban. As you recall that Catholics can, in good conscience, support access to abortion, we call upon you to show your support for Polish women, and reject proposals that further restrict their access to the full range of reproductive health options they need and deserve.

Respectfully,

Jon O'Brien, President
Catholics for Choice

Anka Grzywacz, Representative
Catholics for Choice Europe

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(list of signatories continues on page 4)

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¹ http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19651207_gaudium-et-spes_en.html Para 75.

² http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decl_19651207_dignitatis-humanae_en.html Para 6.

³ http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_19741118_declaration-abortion_en.html. Para 19.

⁴ "Opinie na Temat Dopuszczalności Aborcji". Fundacja Centrum Badania Opinii Społecznej. Warszawa, lipiec 2010. Page 1. (http://www.cbos.pl/SPISKOM.POL/2010/K_100_10.PDF)

⁵ Catholic Voters' Views on Health Care Reform and Reproductive Health Care Services, September 2009. Page 14. (<http://www.brspoll.com/Reports/Catholics%20for%20Choice%20survey.pdf>)

⁶ Characteristics of U.S. Abortion Patients, 2008. Guttmacher Institute. May 2010. Page 9 (<http://www.guttmacher.org/pubs/US-Abortion-Patients.pdf>)

⁷ "Attitudes of Catholics on Reproductive Rights, Church-State, and Related Issues" Catholics for a Free Choice and Católicas por el Derecho a Decidir en Bolivia, Colombia and Mexico, December 2003, pages 33-34, (http://www.catholicsforchoice.org/topics/abortion/documents/2004latinamericapoll_000.pdf).

⁸ "Attitudes of Catholics on Reproductive Rights, Church-State, and Related Issues" Catholics for a Free Choice and Católicas por el Derecho a Decidir en Bolivia, Colombia and Mexico, December 2003, page 33, (http://www.catholicsforchoice.org/topics/abortion/documents/2004latinamericapoll_000.pdf)